# THE POST OFFICE

by

## Rabindranath Tagore

Page shippings: Errata
51/52 Y Amal's words
56/57 Y Madhab D.'s words/repeats

Jill came into my life in 1967 to cover my classes at Dartford West while I was in hospital. Very talented, she became a good friend but life did not treat her kindly. Her husband left her and their five daughters; she moved to Oxford, met a good man, the beloved father of one of her daughters, but developed MS and died much too young.

## Rabindranath Tagore

# THE POST OFFICE

Translated from the Bengali by
**William Radice**

Set as a play-within-a-play by
**Jill Parvin**

**The Tagore Centre UK**
**1996**

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# INTRODUCTION

**William Radice**

It is difficult for people from Western countries to imagine all that Rabindranath Tagore achieved during his long life, and to understand what he means to Bengalis. Not only did he write prolifically in all literary genres (except verse epic); he also wrote over two thousand songs - words and music - that have become the national music of Bengal, painted nearly three thousand paintings, and founded a unique school and university. He was not a politician, but it is impossible to tell the story of India's struggle for independence without giving prominence to Tagore: to his speeches and essays against imperialism, his long-running debate with Mahatma Gandhi about the rights and wrongs of the non-cooperation movement, his pleas for Hindu-Muslim unity, and his passionate belief that Indian society had to be reconstructed by working up from the grassroots - from the ancient culture of India's villages.

As a poet and writer, Tagore will in time be recognized as one of the world's greatest; but the discovery of his genius will be slow and difficult, because he wrote in a language that very few foreigners learn. In his lifetime he became known through his own English translations of some of his poems and songs: his collection *Gitanjali* ('Song-offerings', 1912) made a profound impression on W. B. Yeats, who read the poems out at a famous gathering on 7 July 1912 at the Hampstead home of the painter William Rothenstein. Its publication in London led directly to the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Tagore in 1913. He was the first non-European to receive

the prize, and it instantly made him world-famous. Other books of his own translations followed, of poems and plays; his short stories, novels and an autobiography - *My Reminiscences* - appeared in translations done by relatives or associates. He also brought out volumes of the lectures he gave in many countries on Religion, Art, Education, and the threats to world peace that modern nationalism and economics posed. Many of these books have remained in print, or have been reprinted in recent years, so Tagore the world-sage of the inter-war years, with his flowing beard and robes, has not been quite forgotten. He is remembered too in non-English speaking countries - Germany, Latin America, Russia, Japan - where translations (nearly always done from the English versions, seldom from the Bengali original) commanded a wide readership.

The old image of Tagore, however, was not complete or accurate, and over the last ten years a new process of discovery has begun, through fresh translations done from the Bengali. This new translation of *The Post Office* is a step in this process. For the young actors who performed it in 1993, it was a whole journey of discovery. Most of them knew next to nothing about the Tagore that their grandparents may have remembered, so they were able to approach the play entirely afresh. That is what Tagore himself would have wanted, for he constantly celebrated the spirit of youth and newness in his work, and never ceased to search for new forms of artistic expression. At the same time, he was steeped in India's most ancient philosophic, religious and poetic traditions, whose qualities the world could share, if only they could be presented in ways that twentieth-century people could understand.

Tagore started writing plays early in his career. Plays and concerts were a feature of the large aristocratic household in Calcutta in which he grew up. The family ran its own Theatre Group, in which his elder brother Jyotirindranath was especially active. Rabindranath was soon given an opportunity to act, and in 1881 his own musical play *Valmiki Pratibha* ('The Genius of Valmiki') was performed. Telling the story of how Valmiki, author of the great classical epic the *Ramayana*, was converted from robbery to poetry, it incorporated some of the tunes that he heard on his first visit to England in 1878 - from Moore's 'Irish Melodies' and the like. This willingness to 'break the rules' - to use whatever artistic material suited his purpose, from whatever tradition - became a characteristic of his art. The leading Bengali writer of the day, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, was present at the performance, and it helped to set Tagore on the path to fame and recognition - though he had to face many battles with rivals and critics.

The style of production favoured by the Tagores at that time was much influenced by Victorian theatre. Calcutta had a number of theatres, and they all went in for elaborate scenery and costumes, and spectacular melodramatic effects. In 1902, however, Tagore published an essay called *Rangamancha* ('The Stage') which showed that his ideas about the theatre had been changing radically. He praised the lack of scenery both in classical Sanskrit drama and in the Bengali *Jatra* - a traditional form of theatre in which travelling troupes of players performed mythological plays in villages. *Jatra* is still very much alive in Bengal today: the audience sits on all four sides of a simple platform with a canopy over it. It has remained a living form because of the way in which *Jatra* writers

work contemporary issues into traditional stories, blending speech, song and dance into a seamless whole. Tagore liked the way in which Indian theatre stimulated the imagination of the audience. Kalidasa's celebrated Sanskrit drama *Sakuntala* was for him an ideal form of drama:

> King Dushyanta hidden behind the trunk of the tree is listening to the conversation of Sakuntala and her companions. We for our part feel our creative faculty quite equal to imagining the tree trunk, even though its image be not bodily there...what is the difficulty about imagining a few trees, a cottage, or a bit of a river? To attempt to assist us even in regard to these with painted canvas hangings is only to betray a woeful mistrust in our capacity.
>
> That is why I like the *Jatra* plays of our country. There is not so much of a gulf separating the stage from the audience...[1]

When Tagore founded his school at Santiniketan, 100 miles north-west of Calcutta, in 1901, drama along these lines became a major part of the life of both staff and pupils. The Shakespearean style of early plays like *Raja o Rani* ('The King and Queen', 1889) or *Bisarjan* ('Sacrifice', 1890) gave way to simpler, more poetic, more symbolic modes, geared to the people and ideals of Santiniketan rather than to the commercial theatre in Calcutta. Tagore was a constant re-worker and adaptor of his own plays, adding songs, turning spoken scripts into musical plays or dance dramas. Some of them became

1 Translated by Ananda Lal in his very informative book. *Rabindranath Tagore: Three Plays* ( Calcutta, M. P. Birla Foundation, 1987), p.29.

linked to the seasonal festivals that he established at Santiniketan, and they still play a part in the life of the place, more than fifty years after his death.

Tagore wrote *Dakghar* ('The Post Office') towards the end of 1911, and it was published in January 1912. It therefore belongs roughly to the period of the poems and songs in *Gitanjali* that were to make him world-famous. A sad succession of bereavements had taken their toll of Tagore: he lost his wife in 1902, his daughter Renuka in 1903, a beloved young teacher at Santiniketan - Satishchandra Ray - in 1904, and his younger son Samindra in 1907. Worsening relations between the British and Indians, and the growth of revolutionary terrorism in Bengal, had disillusioned him with nationalist politics. (His opposition to British rule was implacable, but he had an equal horror of demagogy and violence.) His Bengali biographer Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee quotes Tagore's own description of his mood when he wrote the play: 'A passionate feeling of wanting to go somewhere far away combined with thoughts of death - the writing of *Dakghar* was an expression of that restlessness. Strong feelings had to be expressed somehow. If one can give a shape to what is unexpressed and yet restless, calm comes...'[2]

The play was actually performed in English (by Abbey Theatre in May 1913) before it was performed in Bengali - and it seems that the main reason for the delay was that Tagore could not find the right boy to play Amal. When in 1917 the right Amal was found - a pupil at the Santiniketan school called Ashamukul Das - he was fifteen years old, not the boy of ten or so that the play implies; but

2 *Rabindrajibani* Volume 2 (Third edition, Calcutta, 1961), p. 272. Quoted from Kalimohan Ghosh's diary.

by all accounts his performance was wonderfully moving. He rehearsed first of all for a production by a *Balyasamaj* (youth-club) in Calcutta, but plans were disrupted by his mother falling ill - he was called away from Calcutta to be with her. A single private performance was later given at Mary Carpenter Hall on 3 May 1917; but the production that is remembered as the first public airing of the play took place at the Tagores' own Bichitra Hall (attached to their mansion at Jorasanko in north Calcutta) on 10, 11, 15, 16 October, 31 December 1917, and 4 January 1918. Ashamukul played Amal; other parts were taken by Tagore himself, his cousins the well-known painters Gaganendranath and Abanindranath Tagore, Asitkumar Haldar (another painter), Abandindranath's daughter Surupa, and Tagore's son Rathindranath. The Congress party of India was meeting in Calcutta at the time, and its leading members - including Mahatma Gandhi himself - attended the performance on 31 December.

Despite Tagore's preference for minimal scenery in his plays at Santiniketan, the Bichitra production had a set designed by Gaganendranath and Abanindranath that was specially admired for its beauty - as were the costumes designed by Gaganendranath and Asitkumar Haldar. It showed the interior of a traditional Bengali village house, decorated with the kind of village crafts that Tagore did much to promote at his rural reconstruction centre at Sriniketan, near Santiniketan - and a perch for a bird (but no bird: Abanindranath explained that the theme of the play suggested that the bird had flown away).

Ashamukul - who later became a doctor - left an account of days as a pupil at Santiniketan that includes a charming and revealing description of his experience of the Bichitra production.[3] He recalled how during

rehearsals he kept freezing up at a particular moment in the play: the moment when Amal says that the Curd-seller had promised to find a wife for him in his village (p.57). Tagore himself helped him to get over this 'block' by taking him aside and saying kindly: 'You are acting: just try to remember that. *You* don't want to get married - Amal does. Your job is to bring out Amal's feelings...' He remembers being introduced to Gandhi and the other famous Congress leaders after the performance to which they came. We also learn of the songs and music that were added, and two non-speaking parts. Tagore himself played a Baul singer[4] as well as Thakurda and the Watchman; the Baul had a *chela* - a follower - and so did the Kabiraj. On one performance, just before the Curd-seller's entry, Tagore suddenly signed for the curtain to be lowered - and then called Ashamukul to him:

> I followed him to the green-room near the verandah: he sat on the edge of a table. I stood beside him. He sang a song, writing it down on a piece of paper: *bhenge mor gharer cabi niye yabi ke amare* ('Who will break the lock of my door and take me away?') The whole song was written down in one go. He said to me, 'Can you sing it?' Although I had heard him sing the tune, I didn't have the confidence. I went and sat on the stage. Gurudev [Tagore] sang the song himself. The curtain rose. The Curd-seller's cry was heard.

3. This was published on 12 October 1991 in the Calcutta magazine *Desh*, some 20 years after Ashamukal had died - together with an article by Rudraprasad Chakrabarti on the first production of *Dakghar*. I am much indebted to both these articles.
4. The wandering Baul singers of Bengal - free and unorthodox in their religion, and famously inventive in their songs - had a great influence on Tagore.

Anecdotes such as this encourage one to think that Tagore would have liked the 1993 production, in which music, dance and non-speaking characters were creatively added - though not at quite such short notice! In all his works - poems, songs, paintings, plays, and in the way the teaching at his school was managed - the truthful expression of feeling was paramount. We know that *The Post Office* was especially dear to his heart. Amal (the name means 'pure' or 'spotless' - and Prabhat Kumar Mukherjee suggests in his biography that there is significance in the other names too[5] ) represents the uncorrupted imagination of a child - all the more pure and poignant because his life ends before he has a chance to grow up. Twenty-two years after the Bichitra production - in 1939 - rehearsals began for a new production of the play at Santiniketan. But Tagore stopped them. In another autobiographical piece - written in English - Ashamukul Das wrote:

> He made his decision and said in a fit of passion, 'No - No - it won't be staged'...Then after some time he softly said in a sad tone...'You don't know him. There was a boy named...(he uttered my name)...you can't do it as he did. So better leave it.'[6]

Tagore no doubt saw himself in Amal, as well as people he had loved and lost: the child he recalled in *My Reminiscences,* who often felt trapped within the large house in Calcutta in which he grew up - who with his

5. *Rabindrajibani,* p.276. 'Madhavi', for example (=Madhab Datta), can mean the World - the world of convention and anxiety in which Amal is trapped.
6. Quoted by Rudraprasad Chakrabarti in his article in *Desh* (12 October 1991).

yearnings for a world beyond human limitation never ceased to dwell in the heart of the world-famous poet .

*The Post Office,* however, should not be regarded as a wholly sad or poignant play. Tagore always saw Death as necessary for Life, and for the full appreciation of Life. One of the most vivid and sensitive accounts of the school at Santiniketan that we have was written by the Englishman William Pearson, who taught there during the First World War.[7] His book *Shantiniketan: the Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (1917) includes a touching recollection of the death of one of the pupils - Jadav. It also summarizes a talk that Tagore gave to the pupils at a temple-service on the last night of the Bengali year:

> The service was held after sunset and in the darkness it was only possible to distinguish the speaker dimly outlined against a background of white-clad figures seated on the floor all around him.
>
> He began by saying that when a year comes to its end we sometimes think only of the sadness of ending, but if we can realize that in this ending there is not emptiness but fullness, then even the thought of ending itself becomes full of joy. In this very process of ending we once again have the leisure to throw off the coverings and wrappings of habit and custom and thus emerge into a fuller and more spacious conception of life. Even the ending of life in death has this element of fullness in it when viewed from the right standpoint. Death really reveals life to us,

7. Another fine account, from a later period, is to be found in Marjorie Sykes' short but illuminating biography of Tagore (1943), which contains a description of the dance-drama *Chitrangada,* as performed at Santiniketan in the open air in the early 1940s.

and never hides or obscures it except where we ourselves are wilfully blind....

In the 1993 production recalled in this book, an explicit connection was made with the performance in the Warsaw Ghetto that was organized in 1942 by the great Polish paediatrician and educationist, Janusz Korczak (1878-1942). We must all hope that no future performers of the play have to suffer the terrible fate that was met by Korczak's Jewish orphans. Yet even in those evil circumstances, Korczak must have chosen the play because of what it has to tell us about Life, not Death. When Tagore himself died in Calcutta in 1941, the song that was sung at a memorial service at Santiniketan that very same evening was one that Tagore had written to be sung at the end of the new production of the play - the production that was called off. The song speaks of the freedom and the peace that lie ahead, of the vastness of the universe to which we all belong, and the 'Great Unknown' that we all in due course must face. But the true mystery that *The Post Office* encourages us to face is the mystery of Life, not the mystery of Death. If performed in the right spirit, that is its effect. That is what was achieved by the 1993 production, for those who made it, and those who saw it. Our hope is that this record of that memorable production, together with the translation that was commissioned for it, will inspire many more of the innumerable ways in which this unique play can be done.

# THE AUTUMN 1993 PRODUCTION

**Jill Parvin**

The daunting task of directing *The Post Office* seemed at first too much to take on. I work usually with young people in training, in collaboration with experienced performers, and that in itself looked a good proposition for a play involving parts for younger actors; but I was taken aback by the curious anomalies in the text, the enigmatic nature of the characters and the simplicity of the action. In addition, it would be a translated text from a culture probably unfamiliar to most of the players - if my usual policy of recruitment for projects was pursued. Could we possibly do this? Could I possibly do this?

A number of marvellous finds - about the first Bengali production of the play in 1917 and about Janusz Korczak's 1942 production - transformed the task into one I could not refuse. Going to Poland was a snap decision which surprised everyone, but it took *The Post Office* away from Bengal and placed it firmly in the heart of Europe, persuading those unfamiliar with the text that it might belong as much to them as it did to those on home ground. The extraordinary dreams of Janusz Korczak in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942 led to Estera Winogronowna's poignant production, and so to the play-within-a-play that we decided upon in 1993. This may seem to some Bengalis an unnecessary manoeuvre; but if works in translation are to belong to those who play in them stepping-stones are needed to reach the inner emotion offered by the text. Poland was a stepping-stone for us.

Further to this discovery was the chance finding of articles about the first production in Calcutta (see Introduction p. 6). One of the designers working on the play, Carolyn Mather, interested in the illustrations only, returned from India with fragments of these articles. When the frustratingly interrupted Bengali was translated, I found backing for ideas of 'dressing-up' which were becoming for me the clue to performing *The Post Office*. Tagore himself had improvised freely, doubled-up roles and encouraged the presence of additional performers. I was on the way.

His boyhood reminiscences were the final pointers to our interpretation. Memories such as his silently hiding in his grandmother's palanquin to view the forbidden world beyond became an inspiration to our performance, the palanquin even featuring in the production as a means to ferry Amal into the world of his imagination at the end of the play.

Other directors and teachers may see other ways in which Tagore's piece places itself at the centre of world thought; they may well consider other parallels. This particular production came to life as the result of the discoveries above, through fervent discussion between the young actors about the issues presented by Amal's quest, and finally through the curious discovery that the age and sex of Amal are not as important as the sensitivity given to the role. As a group, Parallel Existence was moved and excited by a play which upbraids those who live a blinkered existence and urges the world openly to nurture a joyous and youthful imaginative life.

## CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

### *PROLOGUE: WARSAW GHETTO 1942*

MISS ESTERKA
JANUSZ KORCZAK

Young People of the Orphanage during the 1939-45 War

RABINDRANATH TAGORE
AUNT

### *THE POST OFFICE*

AMAL
MADHAB DATTA (Amal's uncle)
KABIRAJ (a doctor)
THAKURDA (an old friend)
CURD-SELLER
WATCHMAN
HEADMAN
SUDHA (a flower-seller)
BOYS (FRIENDS 1/2/3 in the 1993 production)
MESSENGER
ROYAL KABIRAJ

non-speaking parts in 1993
CHIDAM (a blind man)
PERSIAN SLIPPER MAN (a salesman)
JUGGLER
THE WOMAN IN THE RED SARI

*Note on pronunciation*

'Amal' is pronounced 'Omol' in Bengali, with the stress on the first syllable. 'Madhab Datta' = 'Madhob Dot-to'. 'Kabiraj' = 'Kobiraj'. 'Sudha' = 'Shudha'. 'Chidam' = 'Chidam'. 'Shashi' = 'Shoshi'. 'Rabindranath' = 'Robindronath'.'Moshay' (equivalent to 'Mr.') ='Mosha-ey'. 'Baba' should have a slight stress on the first syllable. Native speakers of a South Asian language will be able to help with the Sanskrit on pp. 21-23, but it does not really matter how it is pronounced: it is unintelligible to Madhab Datta! The 'w's in 'Winogronowna' are pronounced like 'v's. 'Janusz Korczak' = 'Yanush Korchak'.

## PROLOGUE

*Stage Left - bed; Stage Right - dressing-up box, low enough to sit on; light falls sharply, diagonally, across the box, eluding the bed - stark atmosphere. MISS ESTERKA stands Upstage of the bed. Several sleeping figures can be made out. KORCZAK sits at the head of the bed half-reclining yet watchful.*

MISS ESTERKA *[steps into the light]*

My name is Estera Winogronowna. *[Pause. She looks round and smiles.]* The people I knew best called me Miss Esterka. You're still looking surprised. You came to see *The Post Office* and you're wondering, who is this woman? What has she got to do with *The Post Office* ? It's a long story and there isn't time to tell you everything but can you make out someone sitting in the darkness over there? Sitting on the bed. That's Janusz Korczak. They called him 'the old doctor'. He wasn't that old but he had been familiar to so many people for so long that they called him that. I worked with him in Warsaw. In Poland. I really had wanted to be a dancer but you know the way things happen ... my direction changed and I became a tutor in Dr. Korczak's orphanage. That was before the War started. We had such times ... especially in the summer camps.

*Warm light floods the stage. There is the sound of laughter as other characters enter, in summer clothing. They are joined by those on the bed. A game is played. KORCZAK is pulled into the game. They fall around the bed, laughing*

*and panting. Lighting changes and the postures grow cramped and fearful. A gate clangs shut.*

MISS ESTERKA *[Her voice is calm, deliberate, unemotional.]*

Perhaps you can guess what is happening. If not ... imagine. There are forces out of our control. We have been ordered to leave our homes and go into a ghetto in Warsaw because we are Jewish. Gates will be shut on us. Windows will be bricked up. Though we may scrabble to the tops of roofs and stare out and beyond, we will only catch a glimpse of the outside world going on as before. We all have to wear armbands to say who we are. Janusz Korczak won't wear his. Though it's against the rules he often wears his Polish Officer uniform. There are plenty of people who would rescue him. Get him to America, say, but he won't go as the orphanage is more important to him than his personal safety.

*[Pause as she reflects.]* It is difficult for me to tell you what came next. In any case many of you know how it was, know what became of us, what became of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. So I'm going to tell you things you probably don't know. *[She smiles.]* How Janusz Korczak, a Polish doctor, in the middle of a terrible war, met Rabindranath Tagore, the Indian writer and composer. You haven't heard that, you say. That isn't documented. Wait and see.

We were at our lowest ebb. We watered plants we did not expect to see flower. We had little food. Few ways of reducing our sufferings. No ways of escape. At least

that's what we thought until one night when the two men met each other. Yes, met each other so that in the midst of everything we could play.

Korczak was restless, hardly sleeping, thinking of people he had longed to meet, of places he had longed to visit, of what he called his 'beloved India'.

*Lighting changes. The hot, bright light of full sun, in India. Village people do their familiar tasks, come and go. The cries and calls familiar in Bengal are heard. TAGORE appears with a book in his hand which he holds out to Korczak who steps quite warily forward. Then the two men embrace. Caught in the patch of light they converse eagerly.*

MISS ESTERKA

It's really for me, the book. It's *The Post Office*, for me to direct, and tonight you will see it as I wanted it to be and not how it was in the ghetto. We will stay in that dream, you and I, with Dr. Korczak, and Rabindranath Tagore. You can see already that they have a lot in common. And I feel I know it already, Rabindranath's Bengal. There's no time to waste. We must take off these clothes, find something in keeping with our new surroundings. *[She shakes the sleeping figures, pulls them up.]* They don't believe we can do this, but we will.

*She leads them to the dressing-up box and persuades them to take off the ghetto clothes they are wearing. Underneath are simple white garments (kurta-pyjamas), to everyone's astonishment. All are excited and eager to try*

*on anything. TAGORE and KORCZAK help them with headgear and saris and so on.*

*MISS ESTERKA shows them round their new 'home', the house and courtyard of 'The Post Office'. The bed is to be AMAL's. The box will double as a seat. She demonstrates the window which looks out towards the audience and the larger world outside and the open doorway which gives on to the courtyard, Upstage. She gives everyone scripts and parts. They go off, TAGORE and KORCZAK deeply in conversation. She remains with AMAL.*

MISS ESTERKA

You can see the problem I'm going to have there *[She gestures towards the two men.]* as they have so much catching up to do. They had so many similar ideas. Especially about how to treat young people. *[She draws AMAL towards the bed. There is initial reluctance as if this Warsaw Ghetto experience stays with him. She soothes him.]* It's time now. Are you ready? Remember when I come on again I shall be your aunt. *[Exit Upstage Centre.]*

*AMAL tries out positions for a young person confined to bed.*

*Enter MISS ESTERKA, in a sari, as AMAL's AUNT, a book tucked under her arm. She climbs on the bed and makes herself comfortable, something which AMAL likes and dislikes at the same time.*

AUNT

Where did I get to? Had I reached the part when Ravana comes in? No. We're in the forest. Lakshman is just telling Sita ... where's the line? Ah, yes, this is it. Do you remember from yesterday?

AMAL *[peeved at being treated as a young child]*

Of course I do. Can't I read it myself?

AUNT

No. Your eyes are tired. And you couldn't pretend to ... *[She laughs. AMAL turns away.]* Don't worry. We all do that. *[She looks at him quietly.]* Besides I like reading it and if you weren't here I couldn't. *[She begins reading from the book. Then she nods off and AMAL cranes across her to see the outside world.]*

*CHIDAM, the blind man comes and goes. AMAL waves but the blind man does not know he is there. THE PERSIAN SLIPPER MAN sits and eats his lunch. Again AMAL waves. The man does not notice him. A JUGGLER comes. He ventures nearer and nearer. A ball hits AUNT. She wakes and scuttles off after him. THE POST OFFICE as a play-within-a-play, is about to begin.*

*In the following scene MADHAB DATTA and KABIRAJ walk backwards and forwards across the courtyard and through AMAL's room. AMAL strains to see JUGGLER and CHIDAM who are still outside at the entrance to the courtyard.*

*MISS ESTERKA hovers Stage Right, directing the proceedings, getting changes of costume from the box when needed. Members of the cast, as in rehearsal, might occasionally refer to her and continue.*

## THE POST OFFICE

### 1

MADHAB DATTA — I'm in awful trouble. When he wasn't here, he wasn't here - there was nothing to worry about. Now that he *is* here, he's taken over my house, and if I lost him, it wouldn't seem like my house any more. Kabiraj, sir, do you think he -

KABIRAJ — If he's destined to live long, then he might live long - but the *Ayurveda* says -

MADHAB DATTA — You don't mean -

KABIRAJ — And it says in the Shastras, *paittikan sannipatajan kaphavata-samudbhavan* -

MADHAB DATTA — Stop, stop, don't go on spouting *slokas* - they make me even more afraid. Just tell me what I should do.

KABIRAJ — *(taking snuff)* You must look after him very carefully.

MADHAB DATTA — That's all very well, but please tell me how he should be looked after.

KABIRAJ — As I said before, you must absolutely not allow him to go outside.

MADHAB DATTA — He's only a boy - keeping him indoors day and night is terribly hard.

KABIRAJ — There's nothing else for it! This autumn sun and wind are both very bad for the boy, for as the Shastras say, *apasmare jvare kase kamalayam halimake* -

MADHAB DATTA — Please, please, no more Shastras! So he must be kept indoors. Is there no other way?

KABIRAJ — Absolutely none, for *pavane tapane caiva* -

MADHAB DATTA — What use is your *caiva* to me? I just want to know what to do! Your prescriptions are so harsh. The poor boy silently endures all the misery of his illness, but it breaks my heart to see how he suffers when he takes your medicine.

KABIRAJ — The greater the suffering the better the result. As the sage Cyavana has said, *bhesajam hitavakyam ca*

*tiktam asuphalapradam.* Goodbye for now, Dattamoshay!

*(Exit.)*

*(Thakurda enters.)*

MADHAB DATTA Thakurda - oh no - disaster!

THAKURDA What's up? Why should I alarm you?

MADHAB DATTA Children go crazy when you're around.

THAKURDA You're not a child, there's no child in your house - you're too old to go crazy yourself - what are you worried about?

MADHAB DATTA I've brought a boy into the house.

THAKURDA How come?

MADHAB DATTA My wife was desperate to adopt a son.

THAKURDA I heard that a long time ago, but I thought *you* didn't want to.

MADHAB DATTA You know, I've worked so hard for my money, I used to be horrified at the thought of someone else's son

coming and wasting all my earnings. But I've got so fond of the boy -

THAKURDA — So that now the more you spend on the boy the happier you are!

MADHAB DATTA — I worked to earn money before, but it was like an addiction - I couldn't *not* earn! But now I delight in knowing that the boy will get everything.

THAKURDA — That's good, that's good. Where did he come from?

MADHAB DATTA — He's a nephew from my wife's village. The poor fellow lost his mother very early. And his father died recently too.

THAKURDA — Ah! So he needs me.

MADHAB DATTA — The Kabiraj says that with three humours at once in his young body so badly disturbed - wind, bile, phlegm - there isn't much hope. The only thing now is somehow to keep him shut away from this autumn sun and wind. Encouraging children to come out and play is your old man's pastime - that's why you alarm me.

THAKURDA You're right, I've turned quite wild, wild as the autumn sun and wind. But I know games to keep children indoors too. Let me just finish what I was doing, and then I'll make friends with the boy.

*(Exit.)*

*(Amal enters.)*

AMAL Uncle!

MADHAB DATTA What is it, Amal?

AMAL Can't I even go out into the yard?

MADHAB DATTA No, *baba.*

AMAL Can't I go and watch 'Auntie grinding *dal?* Can't I watch the squirrel sitting on his tail holding *dal*-grains in his paws and nibbling? Can't I go there?

MADHAB DATTA No, *baba.*

AMAL I wish *I* were a squirrel! But why won't you let me go out, Uncle?

MADHAB DATTA The Kabiraj says you will be ill if you do.

AMAL — How does the Kabiraj know?

MADHAB DATTA — What do you mean, Amal? Of course the Kabiraj knows. Think of all the huge books he has read.

AMAL — Does he know everything, because he has read books?

MADHAB DATTA — Of course! Don't you know that?

AMAL — *(sighing)* I haven't read any books, so I don't know.

MADHAB DATTA — Just think, the great scholars are all like you - they never go out.

AMAL — They don't go out?

MADHAB DATTA — No, when would they go out? They just sit and read books - they never look away from them. Amal, when you're grown up you'll be a scholar too - you'll sit and read all those big books - you'll amaze everyone.

AMAL — No, no, Uncle, I beg you, I don't *want* to be a scholar - I don't *want* to be a scholar, Uncle.

MADHAB DATTA — What do you mean, Amal? I should have loved to have been a scholar.

AMAL — I just want to see everything - I want to travel and see everything.

MADHAB DATTA — Well I never! See what? What is there to see?

AMAL — That distant mountain you can see from our window - I wish I could go beyond it.

MADHAB DATTA — What crazy talk! No work, no studies - interested only in crossing that mountain! But don't you understand, if a mountain rises up like a great wall it means that to go beyond it is forbidden - otherwise what need would there be for such a huge pile of stones?

AMAL — Do you think it's forbidden, Uncle? I've a strong feeling that because the earth cannot talk, it cries out by raising its hands up into the blue sky like that. Those who sit far away alone by their windows at noon - they can hear that cry. Scholars don't hear it!

MADHAB DATTA — They're not as mad as you - they don't *want* to hear it.

AMAL — I saw someone yesterday, mad like me.

MADHAB DATTA Really? Who was he?

AMAL He had a bamboo stick on his shoulder, and a bundle tied to the end of the stick. He had a water-pot in his left hand. He was wearing old pointed-up slippers, and was taking that track towards the mountain. I called out and asked him where he was going. He said, 'Who knows? Anywhere I come to.' 'Why?' I asked. 'I'm looking for work,' he said. Tell me, Uncle, does work have to be looked for?

MADHAB DATTA Certainly it does. Lots of people go looking for work.

AMAL Fine! I shall look for work, like them.

MADHAB DATTA And if you don't find it?

AMAL If I don't find it I'll go on looking. Well, the man in the turned-up slippers walked on - I stood by the door and watched him. Over there where the stream flows under the fig-tree, he put down his stick and slowly washed his feet in the stream: then he untied the bundle and took out some maize-flour and mixed it with water and ate it. Then

he tied up his bundle again and lifted it on to his shoulders - and tucking up his *dhoti* he waded across the stream and just wallked on. I've told Auntie that one day *I'll* eat maize-flour by that stream.

MADHAB DATTA And what did she say?

AMAL She said I should get well first, and then she would take me to the stream and give me some maize-flour to eat. When shall I be well?

MADHAB DATTA It won't be long now, *baba.*

AMAL Not long? As soon as I'm well then, I'll go.

MADHAB DATTA Where will you go?

AMAL I shall wade across stream after curving stream and go - when everyone is resting indoors at noon, I shall just wander, wander off far in search of work.

MADHAB DATTA All right, you get well, and then -

AMAL Then don't tell me to be a scholar, Uncle!

MADHAB DATTA What do you want to be?

AMAL — I can't quite remember now - I'll tell you later.

MADHAB DATTA — But you mustn't call out to strangers like that and talk to them.

AMAL — I love strangers!

MADHAB DATTA — What if they took you away?

AMAL — That would be even better! But no one takes me away - everyone just makes me sit.

MADHAB DATTA — I must go - I've work to do. Remember now, *baba* - you mustn't go out.

AMAL — I shan't - but I'll sit in this room by the street, Uncle.

**2**

*[Enter CURD-SELLER with the traditional cry, 'doi, doi! doi, doi!']*

CURD-SELLER — Curds - curds - fine curds!

AMAL — Curd-seller, curd-seller, O curd-seller!

CURD-SELLER — What is it? Do you want to buy some?

AMAL — How can I buy? I've no money.

CURD-SELLER — Then what do you think you're doing? If you won't buy, why are you wasting my time?

AMAL — I wish I could go away with you.

CURD-SELLER — With me?

AMAL — Yes. Hearing your call approaching from afar makes me feel so strange.

CURD-SELLER — *(putting down his yoke)* What are you doing sitting here, *baba?*

AMAL — The Kabiraj has forbidden me to go out, so I sit here all day long.

CURD-SELLER — That's a pity. What's the matter with you, *baba?*

AMAL — I don't know. I haven't read anything, so I don't know what's the matter. Where have you come from, curd-seller?

CURD-SELLER — I've come from our village.

AMAL — Your village? From your village far, far away?

CURD-SELLER Our village is at the foot of the Panchmura hills. By the Shamli river.

AMAL Panchmura hills - Shamli river - who knows - maybe I've seen your village - but I don't remember when.

CURD-SELLER You've seen it? Have you ever been to the foot of the hills?

AMAL No, I've never been there. But I feel as if I have: a village under huge ancient trees - by a red-coloured road. Right?

CURD-SELLER Quite right, *baba.*

AMAL Where the cattle all graze on the sides of the hills.

CURD-SELLER Amazing! You're quite right. Cattle graze in our village, they do indeed.

AMAL All the women carry water from the river in pots on their heads - and they wear red saris.

CURD-SELLER Well done! You're right - in the milkman's quarter all our women certainly carry water from the river. They don't all wear red saris though

- but really, *baba,* you must have been there sometime.

AMAL — No, honestly, I've never been there. When the Kabiraj says I can go out, will you take me to your village?

CURD-SELLER — Of course, *baba,* of course I'll take you there.

AMAL — You must teach me to sell curds like you - carrying a yoke on my shoulders, travelling far like you.

CURD-SELLER — Good heavens, why should you want to sell curds, *baba?* You should read lots of books and become a scholar.

AMAL — No, no, I shall never be a scholar. I shall fetch curds from your milkman's quarter under your old banyan tree next to your red road, and wander far from village to village selling them. How is it you shout? Curds - curds - curds - fine curds! Teach me the tune.

CURD-SELLER — Heavens above, it's not a tune worth learning!

AMAL — But I love listening to it. It's like when I hear a bird calling from the

far edge of the sky and I feel so distant: and when I heard your call approaching through the trees from that bend in the road, I felt - I can't explain how I felt!

CURD-SELLER Eat a pot of curds, *baba.*

AMAL I haven't any money.

CURD-SELLER No, no, no, no - don't talk about money. Just eat some of my curds, and I'll be happy.

AMAL Have I made you very late?

CURD-SELLER Not late at all, *baba,* and it hasn't been a loss to me. I've learnt from you what a pleasure it is to sell curds.

*(Exit.)*

AMAL *(calling out)* Curds - curds - curds - fine curds! Curds from the milkman's house by the Shamli river at the foot of the Panchmura hills. Curds made in the evening by women who milk cows under the trees at dawn. Curds - curds - curds - fine curds!

*[AMAL practises his song. KABIRAJ runs on from Upstage Centre. He joins MISS ESTERKA, KORCZAK and TAGORE who is already taking off his THAKURDA headgear, Stage Right. They drag him, protesting, to the dressing-up box and insist on a change of headgear.]*

MISS ESTERKA

You are going to change your personality, be in a position of real authority. *[to KABIRAJ as she places fine turban on his head]* You will be Headman when you come on again. Rabindranath Tagore will play more than one part so why not you? He was Thakurda just now, as you know, and now he's going to be Watchman. And you will be Headman. Imagine Kabiraj and Thakurda have had a chat together and have decided to play parts to make AMAL happy. *[Exit newly attired Watchman and Headman, the latter still looking puzzled.]* There are always reluctant actors aren't there. What you have to say to them to get them to do two parts! He almost refused to do it. OK! On we go.

AMAL — There's the watchman patrolling the street. Watchman, watchman, may I have a word with you, watchman?

*(The watchman enters.)*

WATCHMAN — Why are you calling out like that? Aren't you afraid of me?

AMAL — Why should I be afraid of you?

WATCHMAN In case I were to take you away.

AMAL Where would you take me? A long way off? Beyond that mountain?

WATCHMAN I might take you straight to the King.

AMAL To the King? Please take me! But the Kabiraj has forbidden me to go out. No one can take me anywhere - I have to sit right here, day and night.

WATCHMAN The Kabiraj has forbidden you? Ah - I can see - you're quite pale. You've got shadows under your eyes. Your veins are showing on your arms.

AMAL Won't you sound the bell, watchman?

WATCHMAN It's not time yet.

AMAL Some people say, 'Time is getting on', some people say, 'It's not time yet.' It's only time when you sound the bell - is that right?

WATCHMAN How can that be? I sound the bell *when* it's time.

AMAL — I love your bell - I love listening to it. At mid-day when everyone in our house has finished eating - when Uncle goes off somewhere to work, Auntie falls asleep as she reads the *Ramayana,* and our little dog curls up in that shady corner of the yard with its nose resting on its tail - your bell rings then: *dhong dhong dhong - dhong dhong dhong*. Why does it ring?

WATCHMAN — The bell tells everyone that time doesn't stop, it keeps on moving.

AMAL — Where does it go? To which country?

WATCHMAN — No one knows that.

AMAL — Has no one been to that country? I'd love to go there. It must be a long way away, that country that no one knows.

WATCHMAN — Everyone will have to go there, *baba.*

AMAL — Will *I* have to go?

WATCHMAN — Certainly.

AMAL — But the Kabiraj has forbidden me to go out.

WATCHMAN — Perhaps some day the Kabiraj himself will hold your hand and take you there.

AMAL — No, no, you don't understand: he just keeps me shut indoors all the time.

WATCHMAN — A better Kabiraj than he will come and release you.

AMAL — When will that good Kabiraj come? It's dreadful having to sit here like this.

WATCHMAN — You mustn't say that, *baba.*

AMAL — No. All right. I shall sit here - I shan't move from where I've been told to sit. But when your bell rings, *dhong dhong dhong,* I feel so strange. Watchman -

WATCHMAN — What is it, *baba?*

AMAL — Over on the other side of the street there's a flag flying above that big house, and people going in and out. What's happening?

WATCHMAN That's a new post office.

AMAL Post office? Whose post office?

WATCHMAN The King's! Who else could it belong to? *(aside)* He's a funny boy.

AMAL Do all letters from the King come to the King's post office?

WATCHMAN Certainly! You'll see - one day a letter with *your* name on it will come.

AMAL A letter with *my* name on it? But I'm just a boy.

WATCHMAN The King writes very, very small letters to boys.

AMAL Fine! When shall I get the letter? How do you know he will write a letter to me?

WATCHMAN Otherwise why would he open a post office right in front of your open window, with such a big golden flag flying? *(aside)* I like the boy!

AMAL All right then, if a letter comes to me from the King, who will bring it?

WATCHMAN — The King has lots of postmen - haven't you seen them going about with round gold badges on their chests?

AMAL — Where do they go?

WATCHMAN — From house to house, from land to land. *(aside)* His questions are so amusing!

AMAL — I shall be a royal postman when I'm grown up.

WATCHMAN — Ha ha ha ha! A postman! That's a very important job. Rain or shine, rich or poor - going round all the houses delivering letters - a grand job.

AMAL — Why are you laughing? I would like that job better than any other. But no, no - your work is very good too: at midday when the sunlight shimmers, your bell rings *dhong dhong dhong* - and sometimes at night when I suddenly wake up in bed and find that the night-lamp has gone out, the bell rings from somewhere in the darkness outside - *dhong dhong dhong.*

WATCHMAN Help, here comes the Headman - I'd better be off. If he sees me chatting to you, there'll be trouble.

AMAL Where is the Headman? Where is he?

WATCHMAN Over there - quite a long way off - with a large round leaf-umbrella over his head.

AMAL Did the King made him Headman?

WATCHMAN Oh no. He appointed himself. Anyone who doesn't obey him gets so much stick from him all the time that everyone is scared of him. All he does is throw his weight around and make enemies. I must be going now, I'm neglecting my work. I'll come again tomorrow morning and tell you everything that's happening in town.

*(Exit.)*

AMAL If I could get letters from the King every day, that would be good: I would sit by this window and read them. But I can't read! Who would read them to me? Auntie reads the *Ramayana*. Could she read the King's writing? If I can't find

anyone to read them, I'll keep them till I'm grown up. But what if the postmen don't recognize me?

*[While AMAL is speaking there is an exchange going on between THAKURDA and the KABIRAJ who is now ready to play HEADMAN. We see him puffing out his chest, generally playing the self-important game. He looks at himself in the mirror which MISS ESTERKA holds up for him. He tries out walks. As he walks forward AMAL sees him, shouts out - ]*

AMAL — Headman! Headman! May I have a word with you?

*(The Headman enters.)*

HEADMAN — Well I never! Someone calling out to me in the street! Who the devil is it?

AMAL — You're the Headman - everyone obeys you, right?

HEADMAN — *(pleased)* Yes, yes, they do indeed. They certainly obey me.

AMAL — Do the King's postmen listen to what you say?

HEADMAN — They'd risk their lives if they didn't! They've no choice but to listen.

AMAL — Will you tell the postmen my name is Amal and I sit at this window all the time?

HEADMAN — Why do you want me to tell them that?

AMAL — If a letter comes for me -

HEADMAN — A letter for you? Who would write a letter to you?

AMAL — If the King were to write a letter, it -

HEADMAN — Ha ha ha ha! What a fine fellow! Ha ha ha ha! A letter to you from the King! Of course, of course - you're a close friend of his. I've heard that he's pining away because he hasn't seen you for so long. It won't be long now - a letter will come today, or maybe tomorrow.

AMAL — Headman, sir, why are you speaking like that to me? Are you angry with me?

HEADMAN — Not at all! How could I be angry with you? How could I dare? You correspond with the King. *(aside)* Madhab Datta is getting big ideas, it seems. He's stashed up a bit of

money, and now he wants to hobnob with Kings and emperors! Wait a moment, I can get some fun out of this. Well, young man, if you like, I can soon arrange for the King's letter to come to your house.

AMAL — No, please, you don't have to do anything.

HEADMAN — Why not? I'll inform the King about you - that will stop him delaying any longer. He'll send his bailiff at once to see how you are. *(aside)* Madhab Datta has really got above himself this time - when the King hears of it, he'll be taught a lesson.

*(Exit.)*

MISS ESTERKA

You can see that as the Director I'm not short of problems, in any shape or form. Now he is not sure who he is. KABIRAJ? HEADMAN? Or even himself? *[She is suddenly serious.]* He is not sure whether to believe in the King. But then, who is the King? *[to AMAL]* Yes, go on.

*[She is interrupted by the entrance of SUDHA, puzzled as to where to come on. MISS ESTERKA suggests tip-toeing past AMAL, so as not to wake him; but as SUDHA is*

*almost at the door (Stage Centre) AMAL, who has just tucked himself in, starts up and addresses her - ]*

AMAL — Who's that walking along, jingling? Stop a minute, friend.

*(Sudha enters.)*

SUDHA — I can't stop! I'm late.

AMAL — You don't want to stop - and I don't want to stay here either.

SUDHA — You're as pale as a morning star. What's the matter with you?

AMAL — I don't know what's the matter - the Kabiraj has forbidden me to go out.

SUDHA — Ah - then don't go out - you must do what the Kabiraj says - you mustn't be disobedient, or people will say you're naughty. You're restless because you can see outside - I'd better shut this half of the door.

AMAL — No, no, don't shut it - everything else is shut here, only this little bit is open. Please tell me who you are - I don't know you!

SUDHA — I'm Sudha.

AMAL Sudha?

SUDHA Don't you know me? I'm the daughter of the garland-woman here.

AMAL What do you do?

SUDHA I fill my basket with flowers and make garlands. I'm on my way now to pick flowers.

AMAL To pick flowers? That's why your feet are so happy - your anklets jingle as you walk along. If I could go with you I would pluck flowers for you from the high branches.

SUDHA Would you indeed! So you know more about flowers than I do!

AMAL I do, I really do. I know about the seven Champa brothers. I think if I were let free I would go deep into the woods where there are no paths. I would bloom like a Champa-flower where sunbirds swing on the tips of slender branches. You could be my flower-sister!

SUDHA What an idea! How could I be your flower-sister! I'm Sudha - daughter of Shashi the garland-woman. I

have to string so many garlands every day: it would be lovely if I could stay sitting here like you!

AMAL — But what would you do all day then?

SUDHA — I'd have my gypsy-doll - I'd arrange her wedding. And I'd have my pet cat, with her I'd - but I'm late, if I don't hurry there won't be any flowers left.

AMAL — Please talk to me a bit more - I like it so much.

SUDHA — Very well, if you're good, if you sit here like a good boy, I'll talk to you on my way back from picking the flowers.

AMAL — And will you give me a flower?

SUDHA — How can I just give you one? You'll have to pay for it.

AMAL — I'll pay you when I'm grown up. I'll go and find work on the other side of that stream, and then I'll pay you.

SUDHA — Very well.

AMAL — So you will come again, on your way back?

SUDHA — Yes.

AMAL — You really will?

SUDHA — Yes, really.

AMAL — You won't forget me? My name is Amal. Will you remember?

SUDHA — I shan't forget. You'll see - I'll remember.

*(Exit.)*

*(A group of boys enters.)**

AMAL — Friends, where are you going, friends? Stop here for a minute.

BOYS — We've come out to play.

AMAL — What game are you playing?

BOYS — We're playing at farming.

FIRST BOY — *(brandishing a stick)* This is our plough.

* This scene was considerably modified for the Parallel Existence production. BOYS were changed to three FRIENDS of either sex. See pp. 75-79.

SECOND BOY — We two are going to be bullocks.

AMAL — Will you play all day?

BOYS — Yes, the *whole* day.

AMAL — Then, in the evening, you'll come back home along the river?

BOYS — Yes, we'll come back in the evening.

AMAL — Come back past this room, friends.

BOYS — Why don't you come out? Come out and play!

AMAL — The Kabiraj has forbidden me to go out.

BOYS — The Kabiraj! Do you listen to what he says? Come on, fellows, we'll be late.

AMAL — Please, friends, please stop and play a little in front of my window. Then I can watch.

BOYS — What shall we play with?

AMAL — Here - here are all my toys strewn about - take them all, friends - I don't like playing on my own

indoors - they're just lying around in the dust - they're no use to me.

BOYS — Wow! Great! What fantastic toys! Here's a ship! And a doll like a witch! Look, fellows - beautiful soldiers! Are you giving us all these? You're sure you won't miss them?

AMAL — Not at all - you can have the lot.

BOYS — You won't want them back?

AMAL — No, there's no need to give them back.

BOYS — No one will tell us off?

AMAL — No, no one. But come every morning and play with these toys in front of my door. And when they're worn out I'll give you some new toys.

BOYS — Great! We'll play here every day. Come on, let's set out the soldiers - we'll play at battles. What shall we use for guns? That big reed lying over there - we can break it into pieces to use as guns. But friend, you're falling asleep!

on preceding page
*Plate 1*
Laura Youill as *Amal,*
Edwin Wills as 'Shadow' of *Amal*

*Plate 2*
Edwin Wills as *Chidam*

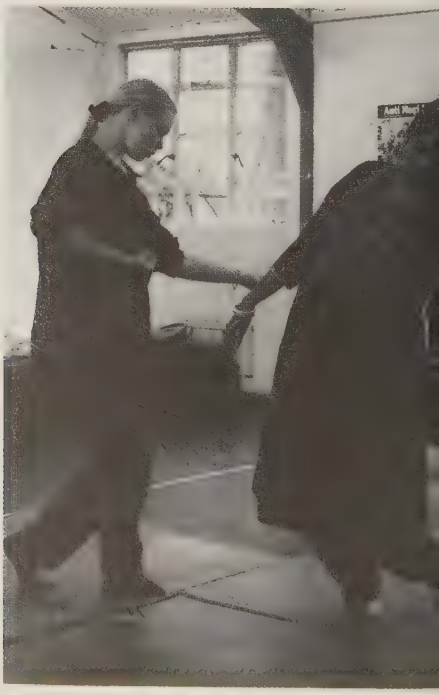


*Plate 3*
Sarah Hartwell rehearsing with Bisakha Sarker

*Plate 4*

Tim Hanson as *Curd Seller*
Rachel Harris as *Madhab Datta*

*Plate 5*

Tim Hanson as
*Persian Slipper M*
Edwin Wills as 'S
*Amal*

on following pages

*Plates 8/9*

Korczak (Film 1990: directed by – Wajda)
Wojtek Pszoniak as *Korczak*
with the children of the ghetto

*Plate 10*

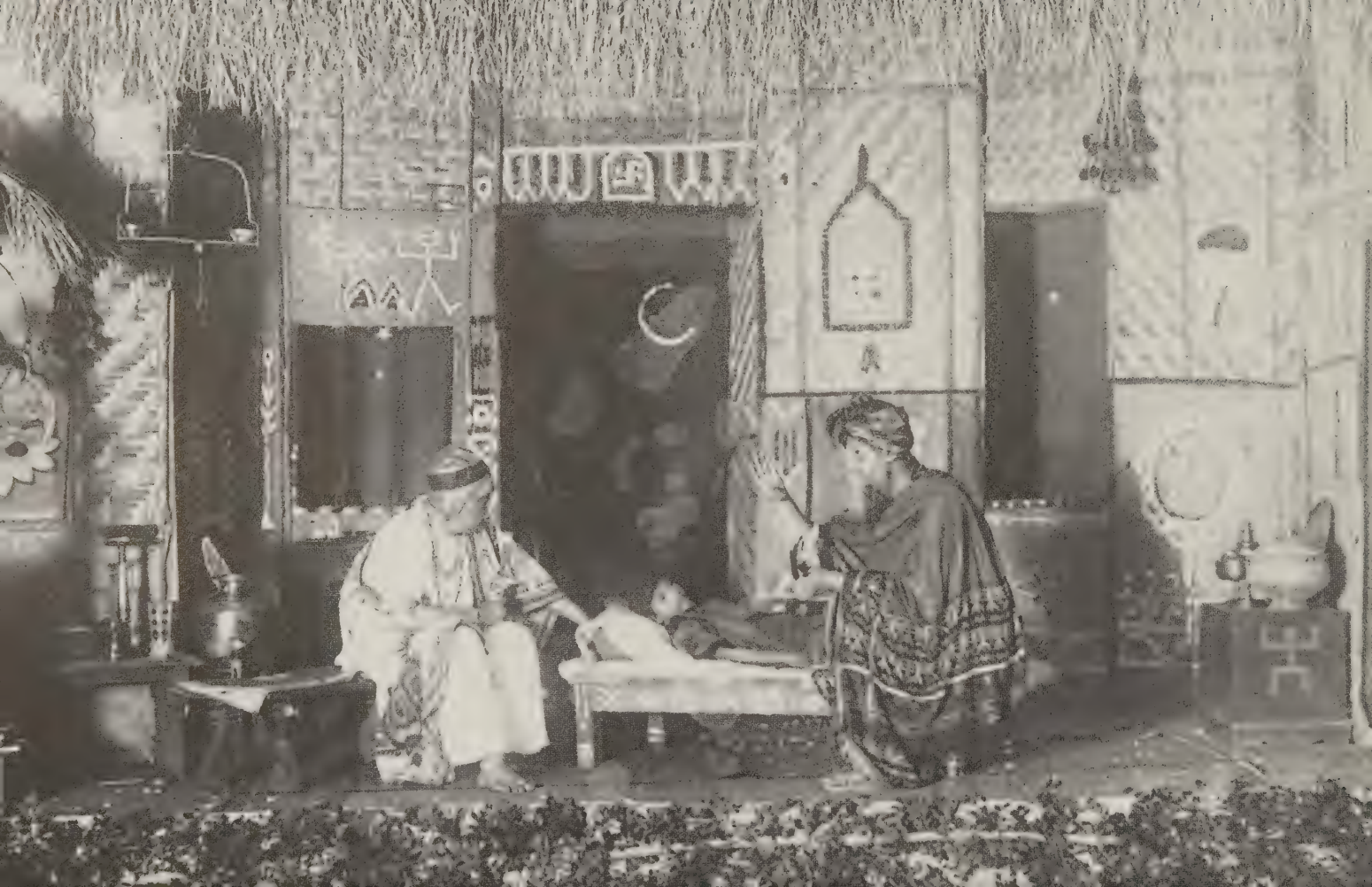
First production in Calcutta 1917
From left to right:
Rabindranath Tagore as *Thakurda*
Ashamukal Das as *Amal* and
Gaganendranath Tagore as *Madhab Datta*

*6*

Hartnell,
n Wills and
Hanson as *Amal*'s 'Friends

*Plate 7*

Laura Youill as *Amal*



AMAL

Yes, I'm feeling very sleepy. I don't know why I sometimes get sleepy like this. I've been sitting up for a long time - I can't sit any longer - my back is hurting.

BOYS

It's barely mid-day - why are you sleepy already? Listen, the mid-day bell is only just striking.

AMAL

Yes, listen to it striking *dhong, dhong, dhong* - it's telling me to sleep.

BOYS

We'll be off, then - we'll come again tomorrow morning.

AMAL

Let me ask you one thing before you go, friends. You're álways outside - do you know the postmen in the King's post office?

BOYS

Yes, of course we do, we know them well.

AMAL

Who are they? What are their names?

BOYS

One is called Badal, another is called Sarat - and there are lots more.

BOYS — Why shouldn't they? If your name is on the letter, they'll certainly find you.

AMAL — When you come tomorrow morning, can you call one of them over and point me out to him?

BOYS — All right, we'll do that.

*(Exeunt.)*

**3**

*[AMAL is completely confined and not now even allowed up for short periods. Everyone who knows AMAL comes and leaves little gifts. BOYS/FRIENDS are shooed away when MADHAB enters.]*

AMAL — Uncle, can't I even be near that window any more today?

MADHAB DATTA — No, *baba.* Sitting there every day has made your illness worse.

AMAL — No, Uncle, no - I know nothing about my illness, but I feel fine if I sit there.

MADHAB DATTA — Sitting there, you've been striking up with anyone who comes along - its like a great *mela* every day outside my house - how are you

going to get well if it goes on? See how pale you've turned!

AMAL — But Uncle, if my Holy Man doesn't see me at the window today, he might go away.

MADHAB DATTA — Who is this Holy Man of yours?

AMAL — The one who comes every day and tells me lots of things about foreign lands - I *love* listening to him!

MADHAB DATTA — I don't know any such Holy Man.

AMAL — It's just about time for him to come - please go and speak to him, ask him to sit in my room for a while.

*(Thakurda, dressed as a Holy Man, enters.)*

AMAL — Here he is, here's my Holy Man - come, come and sit on my bed.

MADHAB DATTA — What's this? That's —

THAKURDA — *(winking)* I'm the Holy Man.

MADHAB DATTA — I wonder what are you *not.*

AMAL — Where did you go this time, Holy Man?

THAKURDA I went to the Curlew Island - I've just come from there.

MADHAB DATTA The Curlew Island?

THAKURDA Why are you so surprised? Do you think I am like all of you? I don't have to pay to go anywhere. I can go where I please.

AMAL *(clapping his hands)* What fun you must have! You said that when I was well you'd take me on as your pupil - do you remember, Holy Man?

THAKURDA I certainly do. I'll teach you such magic spells, you'll be able to travel over seas, mountains, forests - nothing will stop you anywhere.

MADHAB DATTA What nonsense you're talking, both of you!

THAKURDA Amal, *baba,* I'm not afraid of seas, mountains or forests - but if the Kabiraj turns up again with your uncle, my spells will be done for.

AMAL No, no - don't say anything to the Kabiraj, Uncle. I'll rest right here, I shan't do anything. But as soon as I'm well I'll use the Holy Man's

spells to go away - over rivers, mountains and seas - nothing will stop me.

MADHAB DATTA — Really, *baba,* you must stop this talk of going away - it makes me feel miserable.

AMAL — Please tell me, Holy Man, what sort of island is the Curlew Island?

THAKURDA — It's an amazing place. It's a land of birds - there are no people there. They don't talk or walk - they sing and fly.

AMAL — How wonderful! Beside the sea?

THAKURDA — Right beside the sea.

AMAL — And is there a blue-coloured mountain there?

THAKURDA — That's exactly where the birds have their nests. In the evening when the light of the setting sun falls on the mountain and flocks of green-coloured birds return to their nests, the colour of the sky and the colours of the birds and the colour of the mountain are so beautiful together!

AMAL — Is there a stream on the mountain?

THAKURDA Of course there is! How could there not be a stream! Trickling down like molten diamonds - how it dances! Rattling the pebbles as it flows, bubbling and purling and leaping down to the sea - not even the *father* of a Kabiraj can stop it for a second. If I weren't just a worthless human, banned by the birds from their company, I'd make my home by the stream near those thousands of nests, and spend all day watching the waves of the sea.

AMAL If I were a bird, then -

THAKURDA Then you'd be in real trouble. I hear that you told the curd-seller you'd sell curds when you were grown up - but there wouldn't be much of a market for curds among the birds - you'd probably make a loss.

MADHAB DATTA I can't take any more of this! You're both set on driving me crazy. I'm off.

AMAL — Uncle, has my curd-seller been and gone?

MADHAB DATTA — Too right he has! If *he* flew off to your Curlew Island nest, carrying a bundle like your fancy Holy Man, he'd starve! He's left a pot of curds for you. He said his niece is getting married in his village, so he's got a lot to do - he's gone to Kalmipara to hire a flute-player.

AMAL — He told me he would marry *me* to his young niece.

THAKURDA — Oh - that's awkward!

AMAL — He said she would make a gorgeous wife - jewel in her nose, red striped sari. In the morning she would milk a black cow with her own hands and bring me foaming milk in a new earthenware pot, and in the evening when she'd put a lamp in the cow-byre she would come and tell me the story of the seven Champa brothers.

THAKURDA — A perfect wife! I'm supposed to be a Holy Man, but even I would be glad of her! But don't worry, *baba,* let her get married today. I promise you, there'll never be any shortage

AMAL — My uncle's gone now, Holy Man - tell me, in my ear, has a letter for me from the King arrived at the post office?

THAKURDA — I've heard that a letter from him has been posted to you. It's on its way now.

AMAL — On its way? By which way? By that road through the deep forest, that road that can be seen from afar when the sky is clear after rain?

THAKURDA — You seem to know everything! Yes, by that road.

AMAL — I *do* know everything, Holy Man!

THAKURDA — So I see. How do you know?

AMAL — I don't know how. I seem to see it all before my eyes - I feel as if I've seen it many times - a long time ago - I don't remember when. Shall I tell you? I can see the King's postman coming steadily down the mountain - alone - a lantern in his left hand, a letter-bag over his shoulder. Day after day, night after night, he just keeps coming steadily down. Then, when the stream's course gives out at the foot of the

mountain, he takes the path along the winding river - then a narrow path through the millet fields beside the river - then a sugar-cane field, with a high ridge along its edge - he walks along the ridge - keeps on walking steadily, alone, day and night - grasshoppers chirping in the fields - no one at all along the river, just mud-snipes stalking, bobbing their tails - I can see it all. The more I watch him coming, the happier I feel.

THAKURDA — My eyes are not as young as yours, but I see it now exactly as you do.

AMAL — Tell me, Holy Man, do you know the King who owns the post´office?

THAKURDA — I do indeed. I go and seek alms from him every day.

AMAL — How marvellous! When I'm well again I'll go and ask him for alms. I'll be able to, won't I?

THAKURDA — You won't need to beg from him, *baba* - he'll give to you without being asked.

AMAL — No, no, I shall stand by the side of the road in front of his gate and

cheer and ask him for alms - I'll clash cymbals and dance - that'll be fun, don't you think?

THAKURDA Wonderful! If I take you along I shall eat superbly on the alms I'll receive. What will you ask for?

AMAL I shall say, 'Make me your postman, so that I can wander from house to house with a lantern in my hand, delivering letters.' Do you know, Holy Man, there's someone who's told me that when I'm well he'll teach me to beg. I'll go wherever I want with him and beg.

THAKURDA And who might he be?

AMAL Chidam.

THAKURDA Which Chidam?

AMAL The crippled blind man. He comes to my window every day. And a boy like me pushes him round and about on a board on wheels*. I've told him that when I'm well I'll push him round and about.

THAKURDA That will be fun too, I suppose.

* In the 1993 production the part of Chidam was altered so that no boy was needed.

AMAL

He's told me he'll teach me the best way to beg. I've asked Uncle to give him something, but he says Chidam's not really blind or crippled. Well, he may not really be blind, but he can't see - that's a fact.

THAKURDA

You're right, *baba,* the one thing about him that's true is that he can't see - whether one calls him blind or not. But he doesn't get alms from you, so why does he sit with you?

AMAL

I tell him about everything. The poor man can't see. I tell him about all the countries *you* tell me about. Remember that light country, where nothing has any weight - where if you jump just a little you can soar right over mountains? He loved hearing about that. Tell me, Holy Man, which way do I go to get to that country?

THAKURDA

There's a way within, hard to find perhaps.

AMAL

The poor man is blind, maybe he won't find it - he'll just have to wander and beg. He's very unhappy with his life - but *I* said, 'Not everyone has the chance to wander

around as much as you do, begging.'

THAKURDA — Is it really so bad, *baba,* staying at home?

AMAL — No, no, not at all. At first when they kept me indoors I felt the days would never end, but now that I can see our King's post office I'm always happy - I *like* just sitting indoors - so long as I can think that one day a letter will come to me I'm perfectly happy, sitting quietly here. But I don't know what will be written in the King's letter.

THAKURDA — No matter. You name will be written on the letter - that'll be enough.

*(Madhab Datta enters.)*

MADHAB DATTA — What trouble you two have caused!

THAKURDA — Why, what's up?

MADHAB DATTA — I've heard that you're putting it about that the King set up that post office simply because he's planning to write letters to you.

THAKURDA — So what?

MADHAB DATTA Our Headman, Panchanan, has written to him anonymously about it.

THAKURDA Do you think we don't know that all gossip reaches the King?

MADHAB DATTA Then why can't you be more careful? Why do you talk all this nonsense about Kings and Emperors? You'll get me into real trouble.

AMAL Will the King be angry, Holy Man?

THAKURDA What an idea! Angry? Why should he be angry? What good would it do to his royal authority to get angry with a Holy Man like me and a boy like you?

AMAL Holy Man, there's been a darkness in my eyes every now and then since morning - as if everything is a dream. I want to sit absolutely still. I don't want to talk any more. Won't the King's letter come? What if this room disappeared suddenly - what if -

THAKURDA *(fanning Amal)* It will come, really, the letter will come today.

*[The 1993 production used music and an ultra-violet sequence of swirling scarves and clubs to conjure up Curlew Island.]*

*(The Kabiraj enters.)*

KABIRAJ — How are you feeling now?

AMAL — I'm feeling fine today, Kabiraj, sir - all the pain seems to have gone.

KABIRAJ — *(aside to Madhab Datta)* That smile doesn't look good at all - and saying that he feels fine, that's a bad sign too. As Chakradharadatta says -

MADHAB DATTA — Please, Kabiraj, sir, leave whatever he says. Tell me what's likely now.

KABIRAJ — I don't think we can keep him much longer. I warned you not to let him out, but I'm afraid the outside air must have caught him.

MADHAB DATTA — No, Kabiraj, sir, I've kept him totally locked and shut indoors. I haven't let him out - the door has been shut nearly all the time.

KABIRAJ — But a real wind has got up today - when I came in, I noticed it blowing and howling through your outer door. That's not at all good. You

must padlock it firmly - or stop people coming in and out for two or three days. If anyone has to come in they should use the back door. Shut that window, too - the evening sunlight is coming in - it will keep the boy awake.

MADHAB DATTA Amal's eyes are closed, he must be asleep. When I look at his face I feel as if - Kabiraj, sir, he wasn't my own, but I brought him into my house, grew to love him, and now it seems I shan't be able to keep him.

*[THAKURDA signals to KABIRAJ, who must now play HEADMAN.]*

KABIRAJ What's this? The Headman has come to see you! Help! I'd better be off, my friend! But go and shut the door firmly now. When I get home I'll send a special, drastic pill - give it to him - if anything can keep him here, that will.

*[MISS ESTERKA hastily dresses KABIRAJ as HEADMAN. He is trying to do what they suggest. There is light amusement here as he enters.]*

HEADMAN Hello, young man!

THAKURDA *(standing up at once)* Sh...sh - be quiet.

AMAL It's all right, Holy Man - did you think I was asleep? I wasn't asleep. I've been hearing everything. I can even hear things from a long way off. I feel as if my mother and father are talking near my pillow.

*(Madhab Datta enters.)*

HEADMAN Well, Madhab Datta, I hear you're connected with pretty important people these days!

MADHAB DATTA What do you mean, Headman, sir! Don't make fun of us. We're very ordinary folk.

HEADMAN But this boy of yours is waiting for a letter from the King!

MADHAB DATTA He's only a boy, he gets funny ideas - you mustn't mind what he says.

HEADMAN But there's no cause for surprise. Where could the King find a more suitable household than yours? Isn't that why he's set up a new post office right in front of your window? Here, young man - a letter has come for you from the King.

AMAL — *(springing up)* Really?

HEADMAN — No question! You and the King are good friends! *(handing him a blank sheet of paper)* Ha ha ha ha! Here's the King's letter.

AMAL — Don't mock me. Holy Man, Holy Man, please tell me, is this really his letter?

THAKURDA — Yes, *baba,* I promise - as a Holy Man - this really is his letter.

AMAL — But I can't see anything on it - my eyes have gone all blank today! Headman, sir, please tell me what the letter says.

HEADMAN — The King writes, 'I'm coming to your house in a day or two. Have a meal of *muri-murki** ready for me - I can't bear the palace any more.' Ha ha ha ha!

MADHAB DATTA — *(with clasped hands)* Headman, sir, I implore you, don't make jokes at us any more.

THAKURDA — Jokes! What jokes? He wouldn't dare to make jokes!

* Parched rice coated with sugar; very humble food.

MADHAB DATTA Oh no, Thakurda, you've gone mad, too.

THAKURDA Yes, I've gone mad. That's why I can see writing on this blank sheet of paper. The King writes that he is coming in person to see Amal, and he's bringing his royal Kabiraj with him.

AMAL Holy Man, Holy Man, listen to his band playing - can't you hear it?

HEADMAN Ha ha ha ha! To hear it, he'll have to be even madder.

AMAL Headman, sir, I used to think that you were cross with me - that you didn't like me. I didn't think you would really bring me a letter from the King - please, let me touch your feet.

HEADMAN Well I never, what a respectful young man! Soft in the head, no doubt, but he means well.

AMAL It must be time for the day's last bell. There it is - *dhong dhong dhong - dhong dhong dhong*. Has the evening star risen, Holy Man? Why can't I see it?

THAKURDA They've shut the window - let me open it.

*(A knock on the door outside.)*

MADHAB DATTA Who's there? Who's there? What's all that noise?

*(from outside)*

Open the door!

MADHAB DATTA Who are you?

*(from outside)*

Open the door!

MADHAB DATTA They aren't robbers, are they, Headman, sir?

HEADMAN Who's there? I'm Panchanan the Headman. Aren't you scared of me? See? The noise has stopped. Just to hear my voice is enough - however fierce the robbers.

MADHAB DATTA *(looking out of the window)* They've broken down the door, that's why there's no more noise.

*(The King's messenger enters.)*

MESSENGER The King will arrive tonight.

MADHAB DATTA Disaster!

AMAL How late tonight, messenger? How late?

MESSENGER When the second bell strikes.

AMAL When my friend the watchman rings his bell at the gateway to the town - *dhong dhong dhong - dhong dhong dhong* - then?

MESSENGER Yes, then. The King has sent his greatest Kabiraj to attend to his young friend.

*(The royal Kabiraj enters.)*

*[He is played by KORCZAK]*

ROYAL KABIRAJ What's this! Everything closed all around! Open up, open up - open all the doors and windows. *(placing his hand on Amal)* How are you feeling, *baba?*

AMAL Very well, very well, Kabiraj, sir. I don't feel ill any more, I'm not in pain any more. Ah - you've opened

everything - I can see all the stars - all the stars beyond the darkness.

ROYAL KABIRAJ When the King comes, half-way through the night, will you be able to get up and go with him?

AMAL I shall, I shall. It will be so marvellous to go out. I shall say to the King, show me the pole star in this dark sky. I've probably seen that star many times, but I don't know which it is.

ROYAL KABIRAJ He will show you everything. *(to Madhab)* Clean this room for the King's arrival and array it with flowers. *(pointing to the Headman)* That man mustn't stay in the room.

AMAL No, no, Kabiraj, sir, he's my friend. Before you came he gave me my letter from the King.

ROYAL KABIRAJ All right, *baba,* if he's your friend then he too can stay in the room.

MADHAB DATTA *(in Amal's ear)* The King loves you, *baba,* he's coming tonight in person - put in a word! We're not well off - you know that, don't you.

AMAL — I've thought of what to do, Uncle - don't worry.

MADHAB DATTA — What will you do, *baba?*

AMAL — I'll ask him to make me his postman - I'll deliver his letters from land to land and from house to house.

MADHAB DATTA — *(striking his brow)* Oh no, oh no!

AMAL — The King is coming, Uncle - what food will you have ready for him?

MESSENGER — He has said he will happily eat *muri-murki* here.

AMAL — *Muri-murki?* Headman, sir, that was what you said before - you know all about the King! We knew nothing.

HEADMAN — If you can send someone to my house, then something proper for the King can be -

ROYAL KABIRAJ — No need. Now everyone keep still. He's dropping asleep, fast asleep. I shall sit by the boy's pillow - he's falling fast asleep. Turn out the lamp - let light come now from the star in the sky - he's falling asleep.

MADHAB DATTA *(to Thakurda)* Thakurda, why are you standing with your hands together, still as a statue? You frighten me! None of this is a good sign! Why have they made my house so dark? What use is starlight to me?

THAKURDA Quiet, unbeliever! Do not speak.

*(Sudha enters.)*

SUDHA Amal?

ROYAL KABIRAJ He's asleep.

SUDHA But I've brought flowers for him - can't I give them to him?

ROYAL KABIRAJ Very well, give him the flowers.

SUDHA When will he wake?

ROYAL KABIRAJ Soon - when the King comes for him.

SUDHA Will you whisper something to him then?

ROYAL KABIRAJ What?

SUDHA Say, 'Sudha has not forgotten you.'

*[In the 1993 production a palanquin came for AMAL and all the cast left the stage in procession. MISS ESTERKA and KORCZACK (ROYAL KABIRAJ) followed TAGORE until no one remained.]*

THE END

**ALTERNATIVE SCENE FOR PP. 48-52**

*[AMAL stares after her as long as he can see her then sinks down into his bed. He begins to make a mountain with his knees. He spreads the clothes into the world he thinks is there.*

*THAKURDA enters from Upstage Centre, dressed as a Holy Man, and quietly goes to the bed. It makes AMAL jump. THAKURDA puts his finger to his lips. AMAL smiles. THAKURDA whispers in his ear and leaves AMAL sleeping. Silence.*

*A ball drops into the centre. FRIEND 1 enters, trying to avoid being seen. The ball rolls under AMAL'S bed. FRIEND 1 snakes up to the bed. As she/he ducks under the bed AMAL leans over and touches her/his back. FRIEND 1 comes out groaning as head meets bed. Embarrassment and tentative gestures are interrupted by a loud coo-ee, or similar.]*

FRIEND 1 — That was my friends. Can they come in?

AMAL — Yes. Yes. My uncle's working. He won't notice.

*[There is more embarrassment as they shuffle in.]*

AMAL — What game were you playing?

FRIEND 1 — *[The one with the ball. He also carries a stick.]* We were playing at

farming. *[The others look astonished.]*

FRIEND 2 *[not to be put down, moving out of range]* This is our plough. *[He holds up the stick.]*

FRIEND 1 We two were going to be bullocks.

*[FRIEND 3 stares.]*

AMAL Will you play all day?

FRIEND 1 Yes. The whole day.

AMAL Then in the evening you'll come back home along the river?

FRIEND 2 Yes, we'll come back in the evening.

AMAL Come back past this room.

FRIEND 3 Why don't you come out? Come out and play.

AMAL The Kabiraj has forbidden me to go out.

FRIENDS The Kabiraj! You don't listen to what he says?

FRIEND 3 Oh, come on, we'll be late.

AMAL — Oh, please! Please, stop and play in front of my window. *[They look unwilling.]* Then I can watch.

FRIENDS — What shall we play at?

AMAL — I've got lots of things. Take anything. I don't like playing on my own indoors. *[He looks round.]* They're just lying around in the dust. They're no use to me.

*[The FRIENDS pick up various things, exclaiming, wanting now to please him.]*

FRIEND 1 — Are you giving us all these?

FRIEND 2 — You're sure you won't miss them?

AMAL — Not at all. You can have the lot.

FRIEND 3 — You won't want them back?

AMAL — No, there's no need to give them back.

FRIEND 3 — No one will tell us off?

AMAL — No. No one. But come every morning and play with these things in front of my door. When they're old and useless I'll give you something new.

FRIEND 1 — OK. We'll come here every day. *[He starts to organise positions they might take up.]* But ... you're falling asleep!

AMAL — Yes. I'm feeling very sleepy. I don't know why I sometimes get sleepy like this. I've been sitting up for a long time - I can't sit any longer - my back is hurting.

FRIEND 3 — It's barely mid-day - why are you sleepy already? *[bell ringing]* Listen, the mid-day bell is only just striking.

AMAL — Yes, listen to it striking *dhong dhong dhong* - it's telling me to sleep.

FRIEND 1 — We'll be off then - we'll come again tomorrow morning.

AMAL — Can I ask you one thing before you go? You're always outside - do you know the postmen in the King's post office?

*[The FRIENDS exchange glances.]*

FRIEND 2 — Yes, of course we do. We know them well.

AMAL — Who are they? What are their names?

FRIEND 1 — One is called Badal, another is called Sarat - and there are lots more.*

AMAL — If letters come for me, will the postmen find me?

FRIEND 2 — Why shouldn't they? If your name is on the letter, they'll certainly find you.

AMAL — When you come tomorrow morning, can you call one of them over and point me out to him?

FRIENDS — All right. We'll do that.

*(Exeunt.)*

* These names mean 'Rain' and 'Autumn' respectively.

## KORCZAK and *THE POST OFFICE*

*In his diary of his time in the Warsaw Ghetto, Janusz Korczak recorded 'two strange dreams'. The extracts below show how he was drawn towards Tagore and* The Post Office.

### DREAM 1

I fell asleep...sleep...sleep... At first I had no dreams. I felt only that I was driving or flying or swimming...that I wasn't in bed or in the house on Sliska Street, or even in Warsaw or the suburb? Godoev? I seemed to be in a country village...not in a country familiar to me but a long way off...where I had never been.

I could see that the country was far away and strange because the trees were different, tall and green, but not ones which grew in my country. It was the same with the vegetation and the dwellings...they were built in a different way...the people were differently dressed.

I entered a yard...the owner greeted me cordially.

I did not know how I arrived there or why I had come. I felt a sense of shame... turning up like that...but he, as if he knew me well, said:

> I was just going to milk the cows but if I have a visitor my daughter does it...she is grown up. Yes, I am not young any more. I married early, that is true, but I am already sixty or more years old. I have grandchildren who are in school. I even have a great grandson. Yes. I am a great-grandfather.

I always live quietly. I never overwork myself. I have never been hungry. Never had a doctor examine me. I have never quarrelled nor been in court, yet. My dwelling is full of light. My meadows are sweet. My cows give good fat milk. The orchard bears delicious fruit from which I make jam. I pay my taxes on time and every day I give thanks to God that he gave me such a happy country, good countrymen, generous soil, bright sunshine and healthy children.

He stopped talking and looked at me. Then he asked:

Were you born in Poland? Are you a Catholic?

No, I am a Polish Jew.

Polish Jews are living with us also. I know a few of them. One of them is my friend. We went to school together. We sat on the same bench. In summertime we bathed together in the river, in the winter we skated together. He has a brother and sister in Poland...they live there, in Warsaw. Is it true that you were there? Poor man, he is anxious. He has had no letters from them for some time. I understand that there is war there and hunger.

I would like to send your children some jam, some cheese, some sausages, but am I right? It's not allowed. I understand that the Post Office takes away our parcels. The Post Office is a smart invention. After all if you lack something and we have it, we can send it to you, hardly charging anything, Dr. Korczak. I could advise and help.

> Yes...a Post Office is a smart invention...(he repeated it)...the Post Office is a good thing...a nice invention...only bad people disturb us both...do not allow us to come to terms with each other...get on...be helpful.

He sighed. Then he said:

> Come into my home. We shall drink and eat what God gave us.

We were just about to sit at the table...I could see the white bread lying there...the butter, the cheese, the sausages and a jug of milk...then I awoke.

I was angry. Even during your sleep you cannot have a good, before-the-war-type supper. Well, what can you do?

**DREAM 2**

I was simply lying on my bed...then I fell again into a deep sleep. Once more I was riding...swimming...or running...I was carried along on wings...the way was even further. I was somewhere in a very far-off country, completely different from all the countries I had ever known.

I was on a wide road. I could see the sea. It was very hot. Strangely dressed people were walking about. Some were riding in two-horse carriages. Or on elephants. Yes, on elephants.

What country is this?

India.

Yes, India. A very far-off land. Hot, old. An ancient country. Some say that it is a wild country and others that it is not wild, but quite different, which makes us curious.

Then a beautiful old man with a great white beard, good eyes and a wise brow, came up to me. It seemed to me that I had met him, that I knew him, that I had seen him before. Of course, it was Rabindranath Tagore.

His philosophy is very familiar to me. I have read many times the works of the great poet and thinker, seen his writings in magazines and papers. Then in the way of dreams things became even stranger. Rabindranath Tagore invited me to his school.

You also have a school? he said. In your school one of my pupils is teaching. Miss Esterka, that is right, isn't it?

Yes.

Good. Now, if this is not too much bother to you, I will give you a small book for her. A Post Office has just been built in our town. A nice new building. I wrote about it for my students, and if Miss Esterka is willing, your students may perform it too. And I will come to the show.

It's impossible, I said.

He smiled gently and replied:

> You will not see me but I will be with you. Anyway you must ask the yogi.

I woke up again.

A few days later a parcel came from Copenhagen, containing cheese, sausages and jam. *The Post Office* was rehearsed during Pesach (April 1942).

*A collection of diaries, letters and documents relating to Korczak published in Warsaw in 1989 includes the following comments on the 1942 performance.**

*The Post Office* by Rabindranath Tagore was on the banned list, yet the children of the orphanage put it on under the direction of Estera Winogronowna [Miss Esterka]. On an invitation to that performance that survives, to Cywii Lubeckin, who was a leading person in the resistance movement in the ghetto, the following words were written by the Director of the orphanage:

> We do not make promises unless we are certain. We are certain that this beautiful story by a thinker and poet will move you profoundly. We are therefore inviting you for Saturday 18 July 1942 at 4.30 p.m.

Under Korczak's text there are words by the popular ghetto poet Wadyslaw Szlengla:

* Maria Falkowska, *Kalendarz zycia, dzialalnosci i tworczosci Janusza Korczaka* (Warsaw: Nasza Ksiegarnia, 1989), pp. 366-7.

the first truly artistic show since 1939
not just text - but mood
not just excitement - but deep emotions
not just actors - but children

After the show Korczak wrote:

> Yesterday the show *The Post Office* by Tagore - the appreciation of the audience, hand-shakes, smiles, attempts to chat in a friendly manner. The Secretary's wife visited the house after the show and said: 'Though there was hardly any room Korczak proved that even in such a limited space he can perform miracles. Other people need palaces for that.'

Izabella Brodzka, friend of Estera Winogronowa, recalls:

> Saturday 18 July 1942. The atmosphere in the ghetto was very heavy. There was awareness of impending disaster. Today I went with my small sister to Korczak's orphanage to see the performance of *The Post Office*. When we got there we at once found ourselves in a different world. The atmosphere was festive and full of excitement. There were many guests. The children's excited faces showed their eagerness to see the show. It was beautifully done by Estera Winogronowna, a dear friend of mine. The performance was very touching, full of colour and movement. It was well received by everyone with loud applause, and by the adults with gratitude for the the way it enabled them to forget the terrible realities of life. As I left, I felt a huge contrast between the

loving humanism inside the orphanage and the inhuman world all around it.

Zofia Szymanska:

> In the large hall of the orphanage many guests were assembled to see Tagore's play *The Post Office*. A sick little boy is confined to bed by the order of the doctor. Young Amal yearns for freedom. He wants to run far away into the world but the pointless order of the doctor confines him to a dark room. Gazing at Amal as if at a rainbow the children of the orphanage absorbed his words. How they were suffocating within the confines of the ghetto! Holding their breath, they were waiting with Amal for the King's letter which would bring him freedom. 'The old doctor' [Korczak] was sitting bundled up in a dark corner, his eyes full of fathomless sadness.

*We are very grateful to Sofia Walter in Warsaw and Tadeusz Skorupski in London for their help with these translations.*

## REHEARSING THE 1993 PRODUCTION

*The planning and rehearsal of Jill Parvin's production was observed and described by Sheila McKenzie for the magazine* Arts Education *(December 1993). Her article shows how deeply the young cast responded to the play.*

Commissioned by the Nehru Centre, Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office,* translated from Bengali by William Radice, was realised by freelance director Jill Parvin as a multi-media performance arts project for young people in collaboration with working artists and performers. Auditions, spread over several months from March, drew together young people aged 15-27: some from North Westminster Community School, London, others from among those Jill Parvin had worked with in Oxford and elsewhere. Rehearsals started in mid-August at the Pegasus Theatre in Oxford, with the opening night on 1st September in London.

*First impressions*

Dropping in on rehearsals for three weeks and then seeing the finished product at the Pegasus Theatre was a new experience for one who was only familiar with conventional theatre. When Jill asked me to write a piece about the production, I had assumed that I would be watching a group of young actors going through the script, learning their lines and their moves and getting into their roles as they gradually worked up to performance. My first day at rehearsal changed that.

I crept in a little late to find the cast and director working in a large circle in the studio attached to the

theatre, concentrating on movement and group cohesion; while at the back organised chaos reigned as two of the designers undertook preliminary work on the costumes. I talked in whispers to Carolyn Mather, a well-known Oxford painter embarking on her first theatrical production as chief designer. She was working with Sara Peerun, a professional theatre designer. Carolyn explained that she had decided on a palette of eight colours from which to design the costumes and props and the palanquin, which is central to the play's ending.

Sara was putting the finishing touches to a red turban and explained that, because of her origins in Mauritius, she was familiar with Indian dress. On the bench lay a beautiful sari to be worn by the production's third designer, Amy Caswell, fresh out of art school in Liverpool and doubling as The Woman in the Red Sari. She was rehearsing in another corner of the studio, ankles jingling with bells, with Bisakha Sarker, Asian Dance Animateur for Merseyside who, together with Emma Webb, a part-time lecturer in performance arts at Oxford's College of Further Education, was responsible for the movement and dance in the play.

*Research and development*

During her preliminary researches, Jill Parvin had discovered that the play had been produced by orphanage head and paediatrician, Janusz Korczak, in the Warsaw ghetto in 1942, one week before the ghetto fell and the Germans started to deport the 38,000 Jewish inhabitants to Treblinka. Jill paid a flying visit to Poland in order better to understand the relationship between the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore and Janusz Korczak, whose dream of

being handed a copy of *The Post Office* by Tagore, with instructions to produce it in the ghetto with a young teacher as producer, resulted in a performance which took place against all the odds.

According to contemporary records which Jill unearthed in Warsaw, Korczak had smuggled the banned play into the ghetto to act upon his dream. Jill Parvin comments:

> It is extraordinary that Korczak, experiencing the severe deprivations and near starvation of the ghetto, should dream of a Bengali village where he met Tagore, whom he knew only through his writing and shared educational philosophy...and not only dream but act on that dream.

Inspired by the people she met in Warsaw and the help they gave her to make her own connection with Korczak and Miss Esterka, the young teacher who directed the play, Jill wrote an introductory scene which sets the play firmly in the Polish ghetto. This makes the transfer of the action to a Bengali village, teeming with life and activity, all the more poignant.

The play does not linger in the ghetto for long. It moves quickly into the Tagore story of Amal, a Bengali boy confined to his sick bed who, with the help of young friends, takes wing on fantasy and myth, and builds his own world while he waits for the king's letter destined to release him and bring him freedom. Yet throughout the performance there are reminders in the person of Miss Esterka, played by Emma Webb, that these are the orphans of the ghetto who are acting Tagore's play.

*Rehearsal process*

At the start of rehearsals, Jill emphasised to the cast that they must not try to play any particular age:

> Look for the emotional content. Don't concentrate on, say, playing someone younger than yourself.

Amal, played by Laura Youill, a 17 year old student at Oxford's College of Further Education, is a boy of under 10. Jill urged Laura and the others to find the core of the character which would provide them with the key to voice and body language.

Another potential difficulty was the pronunciation of Bengali names and words. Jill made the decision at the outset that when these were familiar to western ears, such as 'sari' (which in Bengali is pronounced 'shari') they would be pronounced in the familiar way. But the unfamiliar 'Amal' was given the correct Bengali sounds, 'Omol'.

In the first two weeks of rehearsal the learning process between cast, designers and director began. The three designers, with help from the cast, cut and made the plain white Kurta and Salwa, costumes which are revealed when the orphans remove their ghetto clothes and become the characters in Tagore's play. They worked on the turbans, on paper garlands and flowers, on sashes, gourd pots and a kite; and under the supervision of the design team, they all worked on Amal's palanquin. Its structure was of wood and it had to be robust enough to carry Amal, yet light enough when decked out with its magnificent drapes and trimmings to be lifted by four members of the cast and carried into the wings at the climax of the play.

The costumes were simple and effective. The white Salwa were rolled up under the orphans' ghetto clothes and at the point of the action where the Tagore play starts, Jill introduced a lighter mood with an amusing scene where the ghetto children choose the costumes for the parts they are going to play from a large trunk on stage. They argue over a turban here, a sash there, or a sari to cover the anonymous Kurta and Salwa, which transforms the wearer into a young village girl.

Besides the trunk, the only other large prop is the bed which Amal has been forbidden to leave by his uncle. The stage is bounded by banners, black on white, which represent the enclosed space at the play's beginning. By the simple expedient of rolling up the black cloth as if it were a blind, a feeling of letting in the light transforms the mood. The cast, under the guidance of Miss Esterka, delineates the confined space of Amal's room with its doors leading to the courtyard on the one hand and to the street on the other, and its windows which Amal's family, under the instructions from the Kabiraj, wish to keep closed.

Between the workshops, the actors developed their characters and scenes; singly, in pairs and in small groups. As a result of the work with masks that they were doing with Thomasina Carlyle, Artistic Director of Trading Faces, and Stanislaw Smagala, 'Stash' to everyone, their approach to their roles expanded and matured. They were helped to build character from archetypes, to work together as an organic group, to use mime, to use tensions from sleepiness through to the totality of panic, and combinations of characters from 'fool' through hermit, trickster to innocent in their search for the physical centre of the role they were playing.

Pete McPhail, an Oxford musician and composer who is a rhythm coach, runs workshops for the Arts Council and has worked with Theatre de Complicité among other renowned companies, spent an afternoon concentrating on different types of rhythm in order to develop a sense of timing which would help the actors pace their performances. He also wrote the score for the production, basing the opening on pre-war Jewish music from a Balkan tradition with the clarinet as the lead instrument. The score retains an ominous drone in some sections to preserve the atmosphere of the ghetto, includes in one place an arrangement of a Tagore song from *Chandalika,* and develops its own style, though still influenced by both Tagorean and Klesma music, to support the emotional content of the play.

In the second week of rehearsal Jill conducted several 'speed' run-throughs at the Pegasus, putting the emphasis on quickly getting under the skin of a role and on the varied exits and entrances. This was to remind the actors that, with the exception of the London run which spanned the dress rehearsal on Tuesday to a performance on Saturday night at the Nehru Centre, with only Thursday night off, they would be starting cold during the tour, with up to a week between performances.

In discussing with Carolyn Mather the gradual deterioration in Amal's condition towards the end of the play, Jill decided that she wanted a sequence in which his imagination takes over from his illness. The result was a collaboration between the design team and Dan Fedorowicz, a multi-media performer who juggles, mimes and clowns and who is especially known for his spectacular fire-juggling.

The stage is blacked out and an ultra-violet spot illuminates long, narrow, disembodied, swirling lengths of cloth in golds and blues, greens and reds, manipulated by invisible hands. The climax of this scene comes in the form of a giant creature which appears up-stage, opens out, twirling at the speed of a catherine-wheel, scattering brightly coloured confetti over the stage as Amal comes out of his dream. It is in fact a large umbrella, decorated with luminous material which, when picked out by the ultra-violet spots, creates the illusion of the magic place where Amal's fantasy has taken him.

*Performance*

No production is without its highs, lows and crises. *The Post Office* proved no exception and provided the actors with major difficulties to overcome as they moved from venue to venue. The transition from the Studio Theatre at North Westminster Community School in London, where the dress rehearsal and opening performance was played, to the Nehru Centre in South Audley Street, would have taxed the most experienced professionals. From a large stage and raked auditorium to a fixed platform built in the shape of a 'T' which stood between two elegant, chandeliered state-rooms, director, cast and back-stage staff had to make radical last minute adjustments to the concept they had been working on for four weeks. Due to the cohesion and single-mindedness developed over the rehearsal period, the group adapted quickly to the confined space.

Of the many Bengalis who saw the play at the Centre, Sanjiveeni Dutta, herself a dancer, was

> infected by the spirit of Amal, whose days were punctuated by happenings and whose life was enriched by a constant stream of passers-by. The multi-media approach, bringing elements of dance, music and UV display, lifts the play from its sombre tone to a world of colour and brilliance. Up to the moment of death, life is lived to its fullest and through imagination death itself is viewed as an entry to another world, no less vivid in beauty and meaning than the glorious palanquin bursting in upon the dark room to bear Amal into the unknown.

For the performance in Banbury, Jill had to rehearse an understudy for Amal because Laura Youill was unable to perform. Edwin Wills, an A-level student from Oxford, took over. His involvement in the production and his personal development during the period of rehearsal prompted a reconsideration of his future, which was to include a law degree at Oxford:

> I think I would rather read English and Drama at Norwich or Exeter. It was an honour to play Amal and I enjoyed every minute of rehearsal, particularly the work with masks. I also learnt a great deal about friendship and it was amazing how the group gelled: something I had never experienced before.

Of the Pegasus performance Don Chapman of the Oxford Mail wrote:

> It was a remarkable example of how a group of young people can work with professional artists to produce an evening of spell-binding theatre.

Dan Fedorowicz felt that

> Jill achieved the almost impossible - a tight, well-paced performance that blended the integrity and camaraderie of community/youth theatre with the clarity of direction and novel approach to form and style that is the test of 'alternative theatre'.

The company was invited to Dartington Hall in Devon by Dartington Arts, funded by the Elmhirst Trust as part of the celebrations for the centenary of the founder's birth. Emerging from a typical Devon downpour, the actors gave a final performance, solemn with their own farewells. Then came the long drive home and they were asked *en route* to record their reactions on tape. From the driving seat Jill heard snatches of their impressions: ...'Friends for life...new skills...first time I had a chance to contri-bute as an actor...marvellous collaboration.' Alas, all unrecorded: they had forgotten to press 'start'....

## OTHER PRODUCTIONS

(outside the Indian subcontinent)

In the West *The Post Office* was first staged by the actors of Abbey Theatre in Dublin on 19 May 1913, in aid of the building fund for St. Enda's College. The play was highly acclaimed in the Irish Press. Two months later the same Abbey group staged it at the Royal Court Theatre in London (10 July 1913). After that *The Post Office* was staged from time to time in different countries in Europe. It was staged in Stockholm (1920), Berlin (1921) and Prague (1926). Tagore himself was not present for the shows in Dublin or in London but he was in the audience at other performances in Europe.

*The Post Office* was also staged in Riga at Intimais Teatris in 1923 by the famous Latvian actress Biruta Skujenice using the Latvian translation of Rihards Rudzitis. Interestingly the theatre first opened to the public with its production of *The Post Office*. In 1986 a translation from the original Bengali by Viktors Ivbulis, a Professor of Oriental Studies in Riga was broadcast several times on Latvian Radio.

Radio France transmitted *The Post Office* (in the French translation by André Gide) the evening before the fall of Paris in 1940.

In the Tagore Centenary year (1961) *The Post Office* in Spanish was staged in Argentina by the Comedia Nacional Argentina under the direction of Tito Capobianco. The whole production was carefully supervised by Victoria Ocampo.

The German theatre director Wolfram Mehring put Martin Kämpchen's German translation of *The Post Office*

on stage in 1985 in Switzerland. According to Kämpchen in an article in the Calcutta *Statesman* (9 May, 1993) the play was taken up again by a Swiss school for handicapped children.

*The Tagore Centre UK would be grateful for any further information about productions of* The Post Office.

## TAGORE'S PALANQUIN

The use of a beautiful palanquin at the end of the 1993 production was inspired by the following passage in My Boyhood Days.*

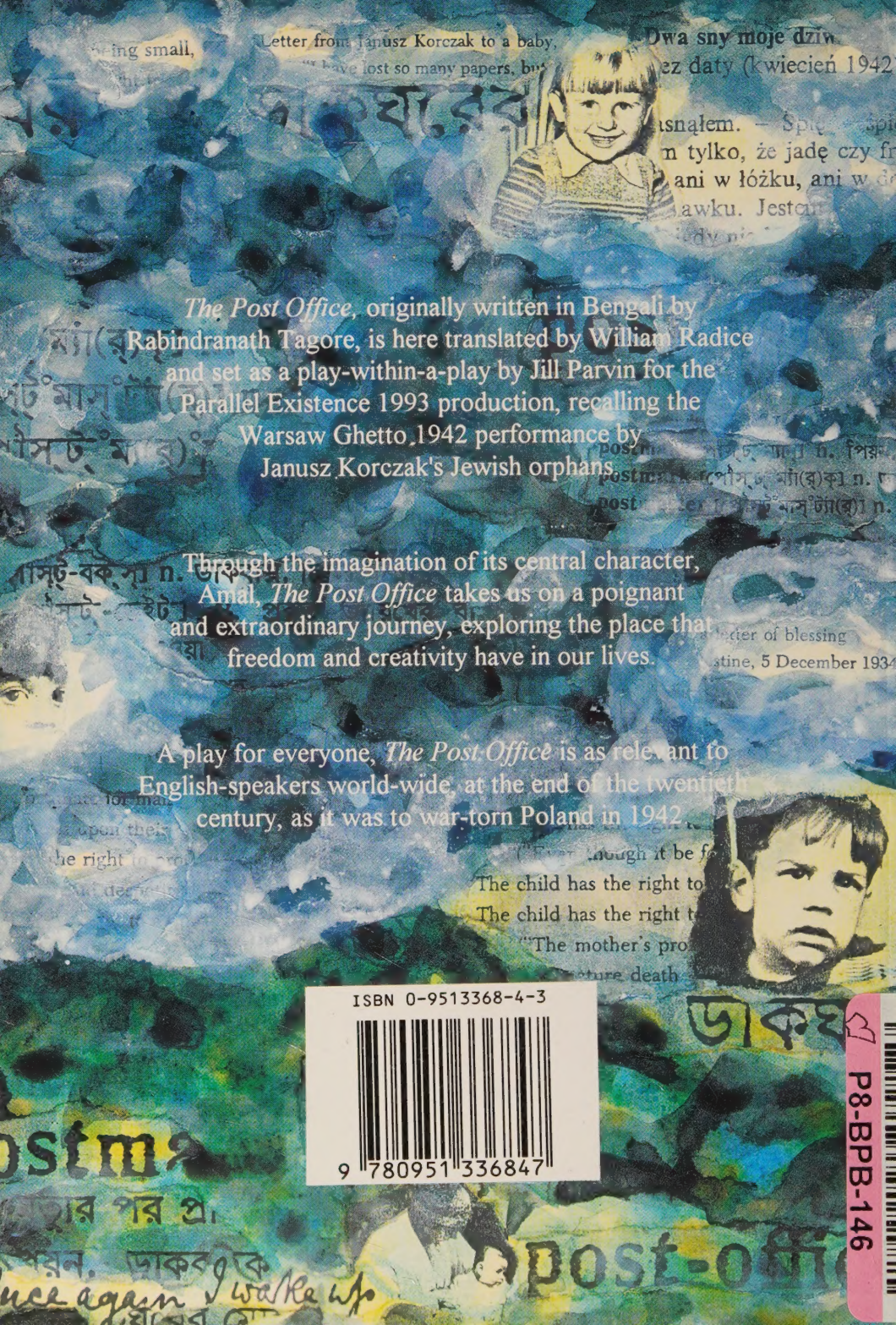
The palanquin belonged to the days of my grandmother. It was of ample proportions and lordly appearance. It was big enough to have needed eight bearers for each pole. But when the former wealth and glory of the family had faded like the glowing clouds of sunset, the palanquin bearers, with their gold bracelets, their thick ear-rings, and their sleeveless red tunics, had disappeared along with it. The body of the palanquin had been decorated with coloured line drawings, some of which were now defaced. Its surface was stained and discoloured, and the coir stuffing was coming out of the upholstery. It lay in a corner of the counting-house verandah as though it were a piece of commonplace lumber. I was seven or eight years old at that time.

I was not yet, therefore, of an age to put my hand to any serious work in the world, and the old palanquin on its part had been dismissed from all useful service. Perhaps it was this fellow-feeling that so much attracted me towards it. It was to me an island in the midst of the ocean, and I on my holidays became Robinson Crusoe. There I sat within its closed doors, completely lost to view, delightfully safe from prying eyes...

The day wears on, the heat grows intense, the clock in the gate-house strikes the hour. But inside the palanquin the day does not acknowledge the authority of clocks. Our midday is that of former days, when the drum at the

* translated by Marjorie Sykes (Visva-Bharati, Calcutta, 1940).

Our midday is that of former days, when the drum at the great door of the king's palace would be beaten for the breaking-up of the court, and the king would go to bathe in sandal-scented water. At midday on holidays those in charge of me have their meal and go to sleep. I sit on alone. My palanquin, outwardly at rest, travels on its imaginary journeys. My bearers, sprung from 'airy nothing' at my bidding, eating the salt of my imagination, carry me wherever my fancy leads. We pass through far, strange lands, and I give each country a name from the books I have read. My imagination has cut a road through a deep forest. Tigers' eyes blaze from the thickets, my flesh creeps and tingles. With me is Visvanath, the hunter; his gun cracks: boom! - and there, all is still. Sometimes my palanquin becomes a peacock-boat, floating far out on the ocean till the shore is out of sight. The oars fall into the water with a gentle splash, the waves swing and swell around us. The sailors cry to us to beware, a storm is coming....


Letter from Janusz Korczak to a baby,
Dwa sny moje dziw
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n tylko, że jadę czy fr
ani w łóżku, ani w
awku. Jeste
The Post Office, originally written in Bengali by Rabindranath Tagore, is here translated by William Radice and set as a play-within-a-play by Jill Parvin for the Parallel Existence 1993 production, recalling the Warsaw Ghetto 1942 performance by Janusz Korczak's Jewish orphans.
Through the imagination of its central character, Amal, The Post Office takes us on a poignant and extraordinary journey, exploring the place that freedom and creativity have in our lives.
A play for everyone, The Post Office is as relevant to English-speakers world-wide, at the end of the twentieth century, as it was to war-torn Poland in 1942.
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